

Homepages: Built-in Motivation

By Cheryl McKenzie

Motivation is a key factor in successful language learning, but even the most motivated students can lose interest and energy during their English language studies. As ESL professionals, we must constantly be searching for effective teaching strategies, as well as for ways to sustain the interest and engagement of students in our classes.

We should also recognize that many of today's ESL students come to our schools with specific goals. They want to improve their English to earn degrees in a United States university or to improve their opportunities for employment in international companies. Many also come with advanced computer skills, or at least a strong interest in learning computer skills. If these students are able to study English and at the same time enhance their computer skills, they are quick to take advantage of classes that provide opportunities for both.

This past semester, I designed and taught a web-building class aimed at motivating students to improve their English writing and editing skills while building a homepage.

Class Description

The class, an elective course, met for two hours each Friday for seven weeks. No homework was assigned. The 15 students ranged from intermediate (400 TOEFL) to high intermediate (480) English level. All had a basic or better knowledge of keyboarding and Internet search techniques. Two had advanced computer skills, but none had ever created a homepage.

HTML

I realized that using a web design program to create the homepage (html) would be very easy. But since I had practiced with several of the more popular "web wizards" and felt the frustration of not really understanding what I was doing, I decided to teach this class using html. I felt that if students could create a simple page using this code, they would have a greater appreciation for the art of the pages they saw every day on the Internet. They would also understand how to make changes or update the information after publishing.

The course

The assignments were separate files students downloaded. The students then entered their own information and submitted these assignments to me via e-mail. The information sheets were also separate files that they could read on the monitor or print out. I projected my monitor onto the lab screen so students could choose to look at the screen or print out the files. An alternative is for the instructors to give handouts to the students.

Week 1: Survey

Students were asked to answer a list of questions to show what each knew about using computers, searching the Internet, and building homepages.

Computer vocabulary check list: Students checked off words they understood and were told they would learn the others.

Criteria for good homepages: Students were given a brief list of “good” homepage features and asked to surf the net, finding examples of good homepages according to the criteria. They were asked to bookmark any that were particularly interesting to them. (Some learned bookmarking as a new skill.)

Week 2: Create a folder

Students learned to make a new folder and give it a name such as choupage1. All their files were to be saved in this folder.

Searching for backgrounds and images: Students searched the web site iconbazaar.com for backgrounds they liked and which met the criteria for good homepage backgrounds, which they learned about in week 1.

Students were to select three backgrounds and save these to their homepage folder. They repeated this step for images (gifs and jpgs).

Biography outline: Students were asked to complete the outline with information about who they were, what their future plans were, where they were from, and their interests or hobbies.

Using Notepad and a browser: Students opened both Notepad and Netscape software. They practiced reducing each program and fronting one and then the other until they were familiar with moving the windows around on their monitors.

Week 3: Basic html code for personal homepages

Using Notepad, students copied the few lines of code needed to generate the basic outline. They saved this file in their folders under their names as an html file, for example, chou.html. They then opened the same file in their browser and checked to see if they had generated a simple message, using the code. If they had not, we went over the code and they corrected the mistakes.

Biography: Students entered their per-sonal stories into their basic homepages. They repeated the steps from week 2, using both Notepad and their browser, until they were satisfied they had enough information about themselves. I spot-checked for errors in their coding and English language biographies.

Week 4: Adding links

Students learned the code to add links to their homepages. Once they had entered the code correctly, they returned to their bookmarked files to find specific information they could insert. For example, if they were from Japan and their hobby was origami, they could select a page about Japan and create a link then select a page about origami and create that link.

Adding a personal photo: I used a digital camera to take students' pictures in the lab, saved their photos to a floppy, and then let them place the pictures into their homepages. During this lesson I let them experiment in placement so they could see different possibilities and results.

Editing: I looked at each homepage and made suggestions about editing, reminding students of the criteria for a good homepage.

Week 5: Tables

Students learned the code for creating tables and entering text or images in these tables. Many placed their pictures in tables and learned how to control image placement.

Students saved their folders onto my floppy. I checked each homepage and via e-mail, suggested changes or corrections.

Week 6: Correcting

Students referred to my e-mail and made corrections based on comments. Many still needed to work on tables and correct language errors.

Week 7: Publishing

I had published their final homepages before the last class, and during that session students opened each other's pages and e-mailed friends and family to give them their web address.

Conclusion

During class we had fun. Students were engaged, and because they did homework without my assigning it to them, they covered more material each week than expected. As they repeated the many steps, they became more proficient. Each homepage was unique; they bragged to others and looked forward to being able to call up their pages on the net.

Visit the homepages:

<http://salmail.sjsu.edu/students>